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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000998

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/01/2015

TAGS: PTER PGOV PHUM PREL CE LTTE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ASSASSINATIONS, COUNTER-KILLINGS

WEAKEN CEASEFIRE, DIM PEACE PROSPECTS

REF: A. USDAO COLOMBO IR 6 816 0140 04

1B. COLOMBO 0812

1C. COLOMBO 0786

1D. COLOMBO 0458

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

11. (C) The May 31 killing of a Sri Lanka Army intelligence officer as he drove to work in Colombo (Ref A) is only the latest installment in a recurrent pattern of assassinations and counter-killings by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its rivals, primarily members of the breakaway "Karuna" group, over the past year. Although most of the violence has been "Tamil-against-Tamil," it is widely assumed that the remnants of Karuna's force enjoy some measure of Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) support. In addition, the LTTE has undertaken several recent provocative actions in an apparent bid to incite a hostile reaction from GSL security forces. The persistent violence suggests a decision by both parties to try to make tactical gains by abrogating key parts of the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) while maintaining the polite fiction--at least to the international community--that they have not resumed hostilities. The Co-chairs should use their June 13 meeting in Washington to warn both parties that the continued violence weakens the CFA, exacerbates an already precarious security situation, destroys the mutual confidence needed to resume negotiations, and raises serious questions about each side's commitment to a peaceful settlement. End summary.

HIGH-LEVEL HITS

12. (SBU) The May 31 killing of Sri Lanka Army intelligence officer Major Tuan Nizam Muthaliff in broad daylight on a busy Colombo street (Ref A) is only the most recent installment in an ongoing series of tit-for-tat violence between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and its adversaries over the past year. While most of the more than 100 victims have been Tamil--either LTTE cadres or anti-LTTE militants, including members of the dissident "Karuna" group--members of the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) security forces occasionally have been targeted as well. Major Muthaliff was the 30th (and highest ranking) intelligence officer to have been killed since the Ceasefire Agreement (CFA) was signed. In addition, Police Inspector T. Jayarajah disappeared from Colombo on April 20, presumably abducted--and possibly killed--by the LTTE, while police sub-inspector Jude Thiagarajah was gunned down in the eastern district of Batticaloa on May 28. (Note: It is likely no coincidence that all three of the victims were Tamil speakers--a rare asset in the predominantly Sinhalese security forces. End note.)

13. (C) Some sources have speculated that Muthaliff's bold killing could be "payback" for the February 7 assassination of Kaushalyan, the LTTE's eastern military leader (Ref D) and/or the April 28 abduction and murder of pro-LTTE journalist Dharmaretnam Sivaram (Ref B). Others, including Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar, suspect that retaliation for the late April/early May disappearance (and presumed killing) of "Newton," the LTTE's deputy chief of intelligence, may be the motive. (Note: A journalist with sources in the LTTE had told poloff in mid-May that the LTTE was "extremely worried" about the disappearance and feared that the intelligence bigwig may have been lured over to the "Karuna" side.) In each of these instances, it was widely assumed--especially by the LTTE--that GSL security forces/intelligence provided some level of assistance to anti-LTTE militants.

NEAR-DAILY ATTRITION, ABROGATION OF CEASEFIRE

14. (C) Sivaram's and Muthaliff's killings captured public attention for several reasons, including the targets'

personal prominence within the community, the boldness of their execution, and--probably most important--their occurrence in the capital. In contrast, the near-daily assassinations of lesser lights on both sides--"Karuna" cadres, anti-LTTE Tamil militants, party members and putative Sri Lanka Army informants on one hand and LTTE cadres and putative LTTE sympathizers on the other--over the past year generate scant press coverage and even sparser public commentary. That most of the bloodshed occurs far from the Sinhalese south in the ever-volatile north and east and that most of its victims are Tamils makes it especially easy to overlook, some observers have suggested. D. Sidhathan, leader of the anti-LTTE People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE), summarized this view most bluntly: "As long as Tamils are killing Tamils," public outrage will remain restrained and the GSL will do nothing to intervene.

¶ 15. (C) Despite widespread public assumptions to the contrary, neither the GSL nor the Tigers acknowledge responsibility for the ongoing violence. The GSL maintains that the violence is intra-LTTE--and thus outside its area of responsibility--while the LTTE contends that most of the killings occur in GSL-controlled territory--and thus outside its area of responsibility. The GSL has also consistently denied providing any support to members of the Karuna group or other anti-LTTE militants. Circumstantial evidence--including the proximity of some Karuna camps to GSL security installations, that attacks on some LTTE cadres have occurred soon after they pass through GSL checkpoints, eyewitness testimony, including from the French ambassador, of Sinhalese- and Tamil-speaking paramilitaries in the east--strongly suggests otherwise, however.

PROVOCATIONS, BRINKMANSHIP

¶ 16. (C) In addition to its campaign of assassinations, the LTTE also appears to be engaging in sporadic, isolated acts of brinkmanship against GSL security forces in a presumed attempt to provoke a hostile reaction. On April 5 a Sri Lankan naval vessel was fired on by suspected LTTE cadres in Trincomalee; on April 23 Tiger cadres fired over the heads of a Sri Lanka Army detachment in Trincomalee (Ref C), and on May 9 suspected Tigers fired on an Army post in Batticaloa. Violent LTTE-instigated protests in Jaffna in March and in Batticaloa and Trincomalee in May may have been intended in part to elicit an over-reaction from GSL security forces against the civilian population. (Unfortunately, in both Jaffna and Batticaloa, the security forces obliged, firing on protesters and killing two civilians.) IN another alarming incident, on May 9 several armed LTTE cadres crossed their checkpoint into the ICRC-manned "no man's land" separating LTTE- and GSL-controlled territories at Omanthai in Jaffna District and began advancing toward the Sri Lanka Army checkpoint. The ICRC intervened quickly, calling in Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission truce monitors to defuse the situation, and the cadres ultimately returned to LTTE territory without incident. ICRC Deputy Head of Delegation Robert Przedpelski (please protect) expressed grave concern at the unprecedented and potentially dangerous incident, opining that the standard LTTE explanation of "mistakes were made" was patently false. The LTTE is too well trained and too disciplined and Prabhakaran wields too much control for that excuse to be plausible anywhere, he said, especially in a sensitive area where the two forces are literally staring at each other. The only other explanation--that the Tigers were deliberately trying to provoke the Army--carries particularly worrisome implications for the CFA, he added.

COMMENT

¶ 17. (C) The recurrent, low-level, tit-for-tat violence suggests that both sides have made a tacit decision to abrogate key parts of the CFA (including the agreement to disarm all Tamil paramilitary groups and a moratorium on assassinations). The parties may be assuming that as long as their militaries have not returned to full-scale hostilities that they can maintain the polite fiction for Colombo and the international donor community that the CFA is alive and well. If so, this is a serious miscalculation, both for the government, which should be using the ceasefire to repair its tattered credibility with the beleaguered civilian Tamil population, and for the LTTE, which should be using the ceasefire to improve its human rights record, end child recruitment and renounce terrorism. Whether the government is providing Karuna militants with material support, occasional intelligence, or merely turning a blind eye to their depredations, the persistent violence further weakens the CFA, exacerbates an already precarious security situation, especially in the east, and aggravates tensions and mutual suspicions between GSL security forces and the Tamil community. Worse still, continued violations of the CFA raise grave concerns about both sides' purported

commitment to a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Co-chairs should use the upcoming meeting in Washington, tentatively scheduled for June 13, to hold both sides accountable for the deteriorating security situation and to express concern that the abrogation of any part of the CFA undermines prospects for peace. Co-chairs should also press the GSL to make a greater and more visible effort to rein in the violence and to apprehend suspects when such incidents occur in government-controlled territory. Suggested points for a draft co-chairs statement will follow septel.

LUNSTEAD